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**Asma Zahoor**

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Asma Zahoor



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## Linguistic Humor in Memes to Mitigate Post Covid-19 Severity

Asma Zahoor

Rawalpindi Women University- Rawalpindi, Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring how the use of humor in memes can serve as a relief therapy in the face of the grave situation of the post-COVID-19 world. The conceptual framework for this study is drawn from Sultanoff (1994) theory of humor. He believes in the relieving effect of humor on humans' psyche. Content analysis was used as a research method to analyze twelve memes shared at WhatsApp, an electronic, social media app for swift human interaction. The study demonstrates that humor is essentially the creative spirit of life that carries on despite hardships. It enables humanity to laugh in order not to cry. The linguistic humor in memes created in the context of the Pandemic Covid-19 serves as a tool to release stress, provide relief and create a sense of well-being.

**Keywords:** Memes, relief strategy, social media, stress relief, linguistic humor

### Introduction

This paper aims at studying the use of humor in memes as a strategy to cope with the severity of the post-Covid-19 situation. Kalsoom and Kalsoom (2019) believe that modern technology has transformed the way we communicate. In today's digital world, social media enables most people to become a source and hub for that which they can relate to — whether they are short humorous texts or more serious ones dealing with different issues related to socio-cultural norms, social practices, or power dynamics. Sa'ad(2018) describes the new internet meme as "a wide-reaching phenomenon," which according to him, is related to "a trend that is not likely to fade into irrelevance one day."

The latest concept of meme has emerged as a subcategory of online humor (Sa'ad, 2018), and viral online humor in particular. Social media offers a fertile space (Rafi, 2020) for the creation and circulation of humor. There are two main factors which have resulted in the widespread use of this genre, the first is rapid development in the production and use of technological gadgets and emergence of vibrant social media with all its swift means of composing texts, taking pictures, recording videos and above all the rise in the availability and use of internet which enables them to share things instantaneously. (Sa'ad, 2018)

According to Sa'ad (2018), "Social media is a terrain where the average human has the power to contribute to a collective and participatory process of culture-making." He adds, "The impact of this process can be seen in the universality of internet speech norms, as well as in the proliferation of internet memes as they are understood by most people — in other words, funny pictures with text on them." Meme, according to google.com, is "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations."

This paper aims at analyzing post COVID-19 discourse of humor in the form of memes on social media. Another definition of meme comes from Martindale (2020) who regards it "a cultural shorthand that like all forms of communication, evolve with those who use them." Memes may have some personal elements but they also have some common elements as well which are understood by a community and duly enjoyed. Shifman (2014) argues that "memes are defined by their common characteristics: simplicity, presence of attempts at humor, and their featuring of common people."

The process of the creation of memes is quite easy and spontaneous (Ibraheem & Abbas, 2015). They emerge even after the most minor events that take place in our social and political circles locally, nationally or internationally. This is because of the swift electronic media and wide spread use of social media by the majority of people. "The other reason" says Sa'ad (2018), "is that there are genuinely creative people out there who deserve credit for being so quick-witted."

Jokes must have a forum to function and WhatsApp is one such forums available on internet on our mobile phones which is free, swift and easy to use. In the post Covid-19 world this is one of the most frequently used mediums for social interaction and meme is a popular genre for cutting jokes and mutual sharing and enjoyment.

The post COVID-19 world with its varied forms of rushed life has been brought to a sudden halt leaving the majority bewildered, fearful, skeptical, uncertain, depressed and demoralized. But our in- built urge and resilience to keep going guide us to cope with the new reality and keep going. Social, electronic and print media has been busy creating awareness, providing updates, suggesting precautionary and preventive measure to add to the gravity of the situation. In this wake of social distancing and forced isolation what keeps one's spirit high is faith and humor. "Humor", says Kazi (2018), "is a coping mechanism that can balance out overwhelming circumstances, neutralize aggression and heal relationships."

### *Significance of the Study*

Covid-19 has generated manifold psychological problems among people on an extensive scale. World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes that the wide reaching psychological reactions of Corona Virus will be more long lasting, far reaching and sweeping than the medical effect. As this has jeopardized the mental health of people at an enormous scale, WHO recognizes a resultant psychological epidemic. It is apprehended that the psychological damage is far greater than medical foot prints. While the illness and death caused by COVID-19 may be a certain percentage of the population, the impact of psychological epidemic can reach out to hundred

percent of population and psychological effects may persist even after COVID-19 abates. It is therefore, urgent and necessary to address this challenge. This paper is written with the express purpose of highlighting the significance and need of developing sense of humor as a relief therapy to better meet the predominant reaction of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, helplessness triggered by COVID-19.

### ***Research Question***

How the use of humor in memes can serve as a relief therapy?

### ***Delimitation***

I delimited my study to the analysis of (12) memes shared in WhatsApp group in Pakistan keeping in mind the scope of the study.

### **The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is drawn from Sultanoff (1994) who believes in the relieving effect of humor. According to him humor, consists of three component which are: 1) the cognitive experience or wit, 2) the emotional experience or mirth, and 3) the physiological experience or laughter. His concept of humor is exactly in keeping with the three main categories of theories of humor developed in centuries, 1) the cognitive theories of Kant, Schopenhauer and Koestler on incongruity and its results; 2) social theories of Hobbes, Bergson, Gruner that deal with the concept of superiority, aggression, disparagement which take humor as a social game and 3) relief theories that are based on psychoanalytical tension-release models of Keith-Spiegel (1972) and Attardo (1994) inspired by Freud who believes in the relieving effect of humor on humans. Welker (1977) also believes in the concept of humor as a relief therapy. According to him "humor serves as an attention getter and tension reducer." Dewey (1894) also endorsed the similar version of the Relief Theory.

### **Methodology**

Twelve memes have been selected on the basis of convenient sampling. Convenient Sampling was found useful because in the wake of Covid-19, the research was time sensitive and this method of sampling, also known as the availability sampling, made it easy to reach people, expedite data collection from the people on hand, and its analysis to acquire speedy understanding of various responses to the pandemic. As in the lockdown it was not possible for the researcher to travel great distances to collect data, convenient sampling allowed to pull out from accessible internet sources/ service because of their convenient proximity and accessibility.

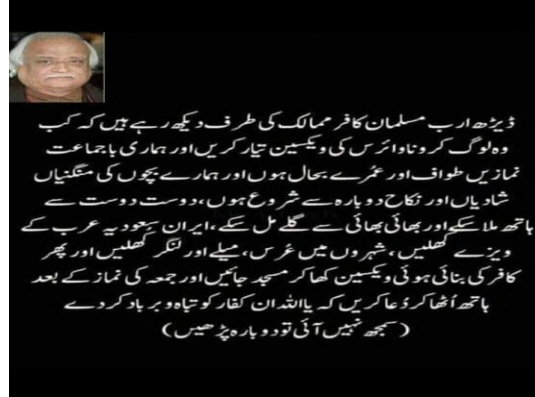
I have done content analysis of the selected memes linking the texts with the background which prompted their production and then analyzed their humorous dimension and how they contribute towards providing a comic relief quite in keeping with Sultanoff (1994) concept of humor as a relief mechanism in the grave post Covid-19 situation. The memes were selected

from the data shared on WhatsApp from 15 march 2020 to 31 May 2020 from three literary forums, one political forum, one journalist forum and 566 personal contacts on the basis of the frequency of their sharing, liking and relevance to the theme of lockdown, closure of educational institutions, and online teaching and learning process. By quickly gaining information, it was possible to isolate and extrapolate humorous memes from general memes. As Xu (2015) says, “Humor that employs a combination of different contextual dimensions increases the value of the intended effects”. The criterion for selecting the local and foreign memes was commonality of the theme i.e. humorous presentation of the process of online teaching and learning during the lockdown.

### **Data Analysis**

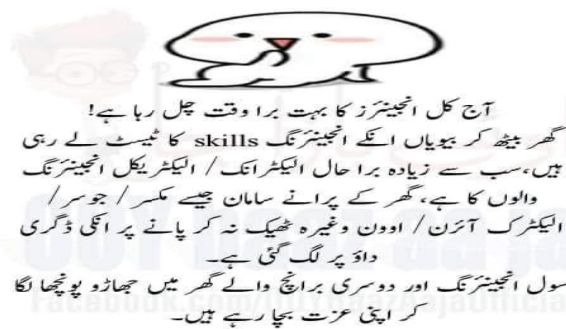
Humor that has long been taken as mere fun and games is an alternative means of expressing criticism about social ills, injustices, pretensions, vanity, arrogance, hypocrisy double standards of judgment and behavior which cannot be expressed otherwise (Force, 2018). Humor can also be taken as a tool of expression of criticism of society, social practices, social structures, rules and regulations and their absurdity or violation. It can also be considered a means of breaking the monotony of life, gravity and bleakness of the situation. Kazi (2018) regards it “the only joyous thing in today’s grave scenario that can elevate our spirits.” Humor brings people together. It has the power to transform the way we perceive the world. Humans have the ability to transform the mundane everyday situations into fun to lessen their gravity. It is an expression of resilience to find humor in darker, more unpleasant circumstances or aspects of life, like death, suffering, and unhappiness. Then there is satirical humor that deals with looking to the various faults of individuals, organizations, or society and joking about them for comedic purposes. Interpretation in qualitative research is a complex perspectivist process. Its intersubjectivity develops out of the unique positioning of the researcher: his/her structure of feelings and cognition, beliefs, context and world view. As Lewis (1992) writes, “Interpretation is the principal process by which interpreters’ position and reposition themselves interpersonally” to the theme and content of their research, and “in this sense interpretations always express aspects of the analysts’ subjectivity”. Twelve WhatsApp memes shared after COVID-19 are given below along with their content analysis:

## Meme#1



There is a subtle satire by Anwar Maqsood that insinuates rather than directly accuses, and there is therefore, a comfort in this. As Swift observed in the Preface to “The Battle of the Books” that satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason so few are offended by it. This meme is aimed at all the Muslims, as a religious community in general. And while we may laugh with Anwar Maqsood at the expense of the Muslims in general, such satirical memes which criticize ourselves are much more disturbing. Muslims are compared with the non-Muslims and found conceited, vain, lazy and pretentious. This kind of humor has the power to transform our perceptions about ourselves and the way we think about the world. According to Morreall (2008) “Humor, joking, and shared laughter are basic and fundamental parts of human interaction”. Using these basic fundamental parts Anwar Maqsood exposes the impractical approach of the Muslim world apparently in the light vein.

## Meme#2

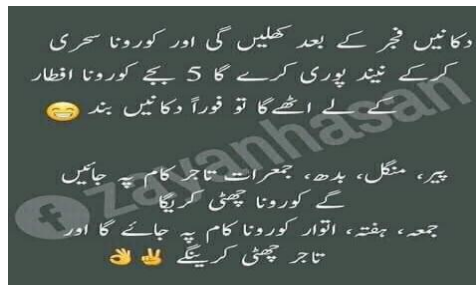


This meme is an example of observational/situational humor that finds humor in mundane, common day to day life situations. The paradoxical relationship of love and hate between husband and wife has always been a butt of jokes. The bonding is construed as bondage. Humor is created by the incongruity of the situation where the master of the house is reduced to the level

of a servant. This perception of incongruity violates our standard expectations and mental patterns.

Humor makes us laugh and laughter is a universal expression of delight across the globe. It exalts us and creates a sense of well-being which is termed as “sudden glory” by Thomas Hobbes (Pakistan Today, 2018). Laughter is a kind of relief therapy. It is observed that the people who encounter more stress are more receptive to humor, which is a source of the provision of instant relief. Humor is a means of regaining of self-composure that saves us from succumbing to the bewildering chaos of our lives. This meme is the best example of accepting new realities and coping mechanism.

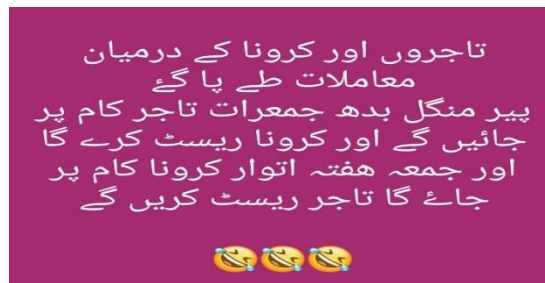
### Meme#3



The first part of the meme presents a humorous arrangement where shops will open after ‘Fajar’ prayer while Corona that has been personified like a human will sleep soon after ‘Sehri’ and will wake up after enjoying sound sleep till 5 for ‘Iftar’ and the shops will be closed as soon as he gets up. The second part to the meme refers to one such deal regarding the distribution of rest and working days between business community and Corona. Kant (1911) is of the view that humor may not have any worth in terms of reason but from kindling our thought process to mischief and then leading to physical reaction of jostling of our internal organs create joy with that physical stimulation which releases stress.

This meme brings out the absurdity, the illogical logic of smart lock down. Corona is personified as a person with whom businessmen can negotiate and settle issues. This humorous personification serves to release tension, relieves pent- up nervous energy like the pressure-relief valve of a steam boiler.

### Meme#4

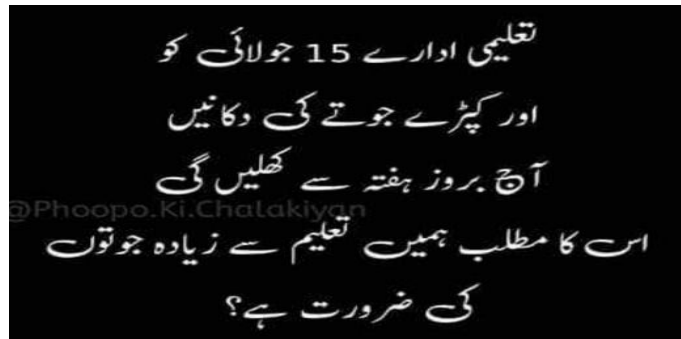




This meme is a slight variation of the previous one where Corona has been presented as an agency that has done a deal with the business community according to which first four days of the weeks will be for the businessmen to work and last three days for Corona during which businessmen will take rest. Personification of Corona as a human agency creates humor. Kazi (2018) terms humor as a weapon for mass resistance in a world where otherwise there is no way to give vent to one's feelings. This meme exposes the absurdities of government policy of smart lockdown using humor as a mode of expression to show peoples' disapproval of the policy.

Laughter according to Morreall (2016) increases pain tolerance and boosts the activity of the immune system, which stress suppresses. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), the largest function of humor is to detach us from our world of good and evil, of loss and gain, and to enable us to see it in another lighter positive light. As here in this meme, presentation of Coronavirus as an agency striking deals with the businessman, creates humor which makes us laugh, hence reduces our stress level.

#### Meme#5



The shoe stores and the clothes shops will open today i.e. 16 May, 2020 (Saturday) but the educational institutions will open on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020. The humorous commentary on this announcement is that there is immediacy of opening business and delay in the opening of the educational institutions. Here the jokingly humorous meme assumes satirical tone about the absurdity of the decision makers. In terms of relief theory, it creates humor which is a coping mechanism and which enables us to retain our sanity amidst the worst circumstances and too heavy drama of life. It facilitates us in elevating our spirits. The subtle humor in this meme implies that our preference is shoes and clothes and not education. By equating education with shoes and clothes apparently the meme ridicules our preferences but in a way it is challenging the wrong policies. Humor of joke telling is not restricted to individual pleasure but has its social benefits as well (Cohen, 1999). Here the social benefit of sharing this joke is creating laughter to reduce tension and stress.



### Meme#6



This meme refers to different people demands to the government to end lock down. The shopkeepers demand the opening of their shops to start business, the Moulvies demand the opening of the mosques for religious gatherings it's only the students who want the closure to continue. In a very light tone this meme highlights the students' love for holidays.

This meme serves as a coping mechanism and a social lubricant (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), as it reduces stress and depression by balancing out overwhelming Corona induced circumstances. It tries to neutralize the pain by juxtaposing the relaxation of students who are no more required to attend face to face classes and spared the grind of hard work. So in the face of negative emotions like warnings, alarming news, economic crunch, humor can provide delight, lessens, neutralizes or even blocks negative emotions, and builds up resilience to cope with gravity of life.

### Meme#7



The announcement of the closure of educational institutions and cancellation of all examination by all boards across the country created ripples of fun and humor. In the above-mentioned meme, the news related to the Federal Minister's announcement is shown as a breaking news and in the upper part a tweet bearing the translation of a Quran verse is shown which goes like this, "Aur

Tum apne Rab ki kon kon si Naimaton ko Jhutlao gay” followed by three smileys one showing a face with hearts in place of eyes and two hearts all expressing hearty reception of the announcement. The closure of educational institutions and cancellation of examinations are regarded as blessings linking them with blessings of Allah enumerated in Sura-i-Rehman of the Holy Quran and the translation of the verse “Fabba iyya aa laae rabba kum ma tukazziban” has been presented. Humor can be created by comparing small things with big things here wit is used to create linguistic humor where loss has been depicted as gain. This meme refers to the cancellation of examination as a blessing in disguise that saved many from the actual fear, exertion and tension of taking examinations.

While talking about the cause of laughter Beattie (1779) says juxtaposition of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances compel us to take notice of the unusual which sparks humor that results in laughter. Here equating the announcement of the Federal Education Minister of Pakistan for cancellation of all the boards examinations with the blessings of Allah is a juxtaposition that creates humor.

### Meme#8



This meme was shared soon after the announcement of the Federal Minister of Education, Pakistan that because of the high risk of catching Corona virus in social interaction and conduction of examinations all the boards of education across the country will pass the students without examinations. This decision was taken during the month of Ramzan that is generally regarded as a month of prayers and final salvation.

Both the situational context and religious context have been combined together in the production of this meme which apparently is a supplication to Allah to enable the one who is praying to get through the trial of “AKHIRAT”-- the other world in the same way as the students of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> have been passed by one decree of the minister. It is believed that in the final trial of the other world we will be questioned about all what we have done in this world. In the examination the students are tested on what they have learned throughout the session or the year and only those who work hard get through but Corona has changed the situation. Humor is created by equating trial in the world hereafter with the matriculation examination in which students are declared passed without examinations.

Freud (1974) believes that interplay of wit in the creation of jokes that leads to humor and laughter, is an unconscious process of in-built defensive mechanism to fight back the repressed thoughts and feelings to restore us back to normalcy.

### Meme#9



In the digital age of swift electronic media, even the smallest statement by politicians becomes a breaking news and gets flashed across many a times. Chief Minister Punjab, Sardar Usman Buzdar, is one such characters whose every move has been critically observed and humorously commented upon. While talking about the relaxation in lockdown he said that parks would also be opened but the swings would remain closed. The logic behind the statement goes with the concept of social distancing that people can move around in the parks without touching anything or coming into closer contact with one another. Someone has drawn a parallel in the meme by saying that Pakoras, the most favorite dish in Ramadan, will be available but there will be a ban on its side dish that is sauce ('Chattni'). The implied meaning is that parks without 'Jholas' are like 'Pakoras' without 'Chattni'. The very comparison creates humor and is a funny expression of wit.

In terms of relief theory humor is a coping mechanism that enables us to retain our sanity amidst the worst circumstances and too heavy drama of life. It helps minimize bitterness and neutralize aggression and enables us to heal relationships. It facilitates us in elevating our spirits. This seems to be the objective behind the creation and circulation of this meme.

### Meme#10



teachers b like "i know this a stressful time" n assign 20 things

In post COVID-19 world online teaching has replaced face to face teaching. The teachers and the students both have been struggling to cope with the new reality and its varied claims. Here the

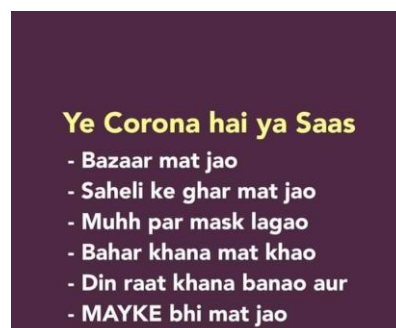
teachers' approach is commented upon that they begin with saying that they know it is stressful time but then assign 20 things to the students to add to their stress. Morreall (2016) says that humor helps us get rid of pessimism by keeping us larger than what we do, and greater than what can happen to us. Here in this meme apparently the attitude of the teachers has been ridiculed but indirectly there is a realization for the necessity of coping with the new reality. Many students can relate to this meme and this very alignment provides them a comic relief.

### Meme# 11



This is also another meme associated with the academic activity, in the upper part the world is seen as empty and devoid of any hustle and bustle of traffic, hence silent and on the other side teachers are presented as playing on their individual musical instruments disturbing the silence of the world or peace of the lives of the students. It can be taken as a comment on the agonizing state of the teachers' trial on harping on their individual selves struggling with the online teaching mode. Humor is created by presenting a contrast in the silence of the world and how this silence is broken by the teaching community where the effort to engage the students has been going on.

### Meme #12



There has always been jokes about mother-in-law's attitude across the world. In this meme Corona has been compared to a mother-in-law who has objections against her daughter-in-law's

going to the market, going to a friend's house, taking meals outside home and going to parental home. She also insists that her daughter-in-law should cover her face and go on cooking meals all the day. Corona has restricted humans to stay at home, not to go out for taking meals or shopping, the precaution of social distancing doesn't allow people to visit anyone, one has to wear mask to avoid catching infection and the servants are mostly banned which results in doing the domestic chores the whole day long. All these grave realities of post Corona world have been put in a lighter context of traditional 'Saas – bahu conflict' to create humor and to ease tension.

Freud (1974) believes that interplay of wit in the creation of jokes that leads to humor and laughter is an unconscious process of in-built defensive mechanism to fight back the repressed thoughts and feelings to restore us back to normalcy. Here interplay of wit and humor leads to laughter to get us back to normalcy.

## Conclusion

In today's digital world, digital networks have always be teeming with jokes, humorous and satirical videos and memes about almost everything in public sphere ranging from politics to the absurdities of new world cultures. Humor is the best means to release tension, hence can be taken as a relief therapy. This study shows that sarcasm and silliness are the two most prevalent types of linguistic humor used in WhatsApp memes which deal with comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness and surprise. The study also demonstrates that humor is essentially the creative spirit of life which carries on despite hardships. It enables humanity to laugh in order not to cry. In the present state of fret and fear joking fosters pragmatism and rationality. It also provides pleasure; it reduces stress and helps the humans to cope with the gravity of life. The abundance of linguistic humor in memes created in the context of the Pandemic Covid-19 serves as a tool to release stress, provide relief and create a sense of well-being.

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